

**3rd KANITA POSTGRADUATE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON  
GENDER STUDIES**

16 – 17 November 2016  
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang

**Understanding of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace**

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**Abstract**

Sexual harassment is the violation of a person's personal integrity and wellbeing and is an incident that often occurs in a workplace context. While it was mainly associated with situations in a traditional employment workplace, it has also been reported in organizations that consist of non-traditional or mixed employment relationships such as educational institutions. Sexual harassment in a university setting worldwide is quite pervasive. In 2006, the American Association of University Women found that 62% of female and 61% of male college students had experience being sexually harassed at their university. In Japan, sexual harassment of students by teachers is so prevalent it has been given its own acronym--SHOC, for "Sexual Harassment on Campus". A research in Japan by the Women's Studies Education Network showed that about 15% of undergraduates, about 34% of graduate students, and about 36% of the teaching staff (both full-time and part-time) had experienced some forms of sexual harassment (Takashi, 2001). This paper presents a discussion about the understanding of employees in institutions of higher learning about the issue of sexual harassment. Understanding and being aware about sexual harassment help staff of universities to seek appropriate intervention when they are faced with sexual harassment issues. The study on which this paper is based briefly surveys the understanding about sexual harassment amongst staff members in two universities in Malaysia. A total of 224 male and female staffs of *Universiti Sains Malaysia* (USM) and *Universiti Malaysia Sabah* (UMS) answered a short survey given to them at the beginning of training programmes on sexual harassment. The results show that staffs have a relatively high understanding about incidents of sexual harassment. The research indicates that there is a substantial number of incidents of sexual harassment on campuses and victims of sexual harassment tend to be female. Staff's experiences of sexual harassment also correlate with their understanding and awareness of sexual harassment.

**Keywords:** sexual harassment, staffs, understanding, perception, experience

**1. Introduction**

Sexual harassment is the violation of a person's personal integrity and wellbeing and is an incident that often occurs in a workplace context. Women around the world experience sexual harassment and it does not only constitute an extremely bad experience but also may be

degrading to victims' emotions and feelings. Historically, sexual harassment was mostly reported in the non-traditional or mixed employment relationships, at the time when women begin to be allowed to enter male-dominated occupations such as engineering, medicine, and management. A university may also be an organisation where cases of sexual harassment can be pervasive. For example, in 2006, the American Association of University Women reported that about 62% female and 61% male students had experienced sexual harassment at universities in the United States (Hill, C. & Silva, E. (2006). Several years ago Japan released studies that showed the prevalence of sexual harassment behaviours amongst teachers toward students. The prevalence had led to the emergence of an acronym --SHOC, for "Sexual Harassment on Campus". Women's Studies Education Network studied university's students and teaching staff in Japan and found that at least 15% of undergraduate and 34% of graduate students as well as 36% of teaching staffs (i.e. full-time and part-time) had experienced some forms of sexual harassment (Takashi, 2001). These studies about sexual harassment on campus were mostly conducted in developed countries and very few such studies had been initiated in developing countries such as Malaysia (Limpaphayom & Williams, 2006).

In Malaysia, the issue is still academically under-researched, but the issue is always being discussed and reported in various printed media where women employees in Malaysia are frequently exposed to sexual harassment behaviours by their male colleagues and bosses (Ismail, et.al., 2007). Female employees are increasingly subjected to the chances of being sexually harassed in their working space. Ng, et.al (2003) and Marican (1999) illustrated that the percentage of sexual harassment at the workplace in Malaysia is between 35per cents to 53 per cent. The Malaysian government had initiated and formulated the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment 1999. Through this Code of Practices, sexual harassment is defined as any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that may perceive by an individual (a) as a condition of one's employment; (b) as an offense or humiliation; or (c) as a threat to one's well-being (Ng., et.al., 2003). There are five forms of sexual harassment stated in the Malaysia Code of Practices on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment which consists of verbal; non-verbal or gestural; visual; psychological; and physical harassment.

In the late 1980s, awareness of sexual harassment's behaviours has triggered a group of researchers of Universiti Sains Malaysia to conduct a research on sexual harassment in the university campus. The main concern at that particular time was to scrutinise the perception and attitude of staffs and students regarding the issue; where the study revealed sexual harassment behaviours of perpetrators were generally influenced by the actions and responses of the victims themselves (Endut, et.al., 2011).

The purpose of this study is to gauge the level of understanding amongst staffs about sexual harassment at public universities, using the examples from two universities namely, *Universiti Sains Malaysia* (USM) and *Universiti Malaysia Sabah* (UMS). Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

- To evaluate the understanding and perception about sexual harassment amongst staffs in USM and UMS
- To explore the extent to which the sexual harassment is experienced by staffs in both universities
- To understand the staff's perception in dealing sexual harassment at the workplace

## **2. Methodology**

The study was conducted in two campuses of USM (i.e. the Main Campus (MC) and Engineering Campus (EC); and UMS (the main campus). A total of 224 staffs (both female and male) were randomly recruited as participants. A short questionnaire was given to them at the beginning of training programmes on sexual harassment at the universities. A survey questionnaire was preferred as the main instrument to assess staff's understanding and perception of sexual harassment as well as their experience about the issue. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire was tested in a pilot study. The questionnaire were administered by meeting the respondents at the beginning of the sexual harassment training programme, distributing the questionnaires for them to promptly give the answers; and collecting the answers when they finished. The first page of the survey questionnaire clearly explains about the study and informed consents are required from the staffs before they begin to answer. For the purpose of this study, the questionnaire is divided into four sections: A- Demographics of respondents, B- Understanding about sexual harassment, C- Experiences of sexual harassment amongst staffs, and D- Perception, experiences and suggestion to deal with sexual harassment

at the workplace. The data then was analysed using the software SPSS version 24.

### 3. Findings/ Analysis

#### 3.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

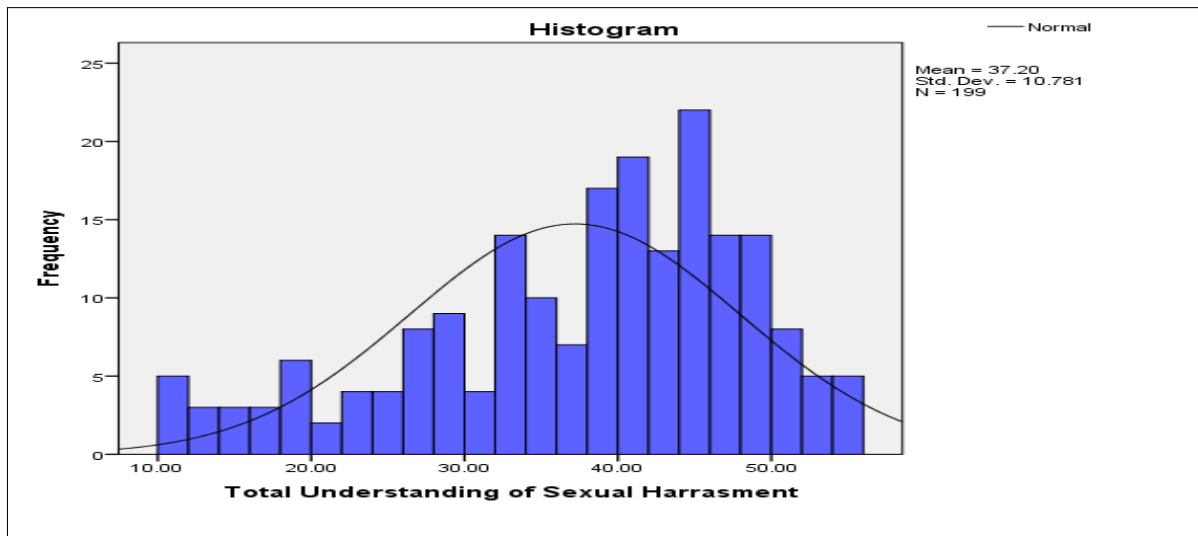
**Table 1: Gender and Age of Respondents**

			Respondent's Age (in years)					Total
			18-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	
Respondent's Gender	Female	Count	1	50	49	12	22	136
		% within Respondent's Age	100.0%	87.7%	57.6%	32.4%	52.4%	60.7%
	Male	Count	0	7	36	25	20	88
		% within Respondent's Age	0.0%	12.3%	42.4%	67.6%	47.6%	39.3%
Total		Count	1	57	85	37	42	224
		% within Respondent's Age	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

A total of 224 questionnaires were completed. As mentioned above, the respondents are chosen randomly from a determined sample size. Table 1 illustrated the percentage of respondents participated in this study consisted of 61 per cent female staffs. According to Economic Planning Unit Malaysia (2015), the labour force participation rate among female hiking positively from 48 per cent (2011) to 54 per cent (2014). Directly, this mirrors the increment of female employed persons in Malaysia where it directly contributed to the female participation in the labour force market; where it shows high exceeding to 58.0 per cent for the prime age groups which are 25 to 34; 35 to 44; and 45 to 54 years (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015). In this study, the respondents are chosen from amongst staffs who were at least 1 year to more than 31 years working experience in each workplace and the results identified that the majority of the staffs (age from 31 to 40) have worked at the university approximately 6 to 10 years.

#### 3.2 Understanding about Sexual Harassment

In this section, the respondents were asked 11-item questions on their understanding or perception about sexual harassment. The respondents have to select their most preferred answer from a scale of 1 to 5 (i.e. 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree) which clearly indicating lowest or highest understanding or perception about types of sexual harassment. To evaluate the staffs' understanding of the issue, a total score mean was calculated. In Figure 1, the results interpreted a negative skewness (scores clustered to the right at the high value) of total scores at value - 0.714.



**Figure 1: Histogram of Total Score for Understanding or Perception about Sexual Harassment**

So, Figure 1 explained that there is high understanding of sexual harassment amongst both male and female staffs in this study. From the scale of 11 items, the minimum total score is 11. The neutral score is 28 and the higher score is 45. The mean of the total score is 37.2 which are higher than the neutral score, thus specifying that the respondents generally have high understanding on types or incidents of sexual harassment, so as to determine the kind of incidents. Additionally, about 158 of respondents' scores more than 28 which are obviously indicate that majority of the respondents understand and have the ability to differentiate the sexual harassment incidents, vice versa. From the gender perspective, there were different levels of understanding about sexual harassment has been determined between female and male staffs. In this study, the female staffs understanding about sexual harassment behaviour are far higher as compared to male staffs in both universities. Yet, as referred to Partial eta squared effect size statistics used to gauge this understanding level, the difference level of understanding between genders was very small with eta squared value of 0.0074 in the means (0.74 per cent of the variance); therefore indicated no significant difference between the perception of male and female staffs of sexual harassment behaviour.

### 3.3 Experiences of Sexual Harassment amongst Staffs

To explore the experiences of sexual harassment incidents among staffs at both universities,

the respondents were asking on how they perceive such behaviour which related to sexual harassment incidents. Their experiences of such situations are referring to their preferences of the answer either yes; no; or unsure. Table 2 below illustrated the average number of staffs at both universities who had experienced sexual harassment on campus which below 15 per cent. However, female staff's percentage shown that they have high tendency to face sexual harassment incidents as compared to the male staffs, 23 (18.5 per cent) is female staffs and 7 (8.2 per cent). Overall, this study found that at least about 8 per cent male staffs and almost 19 per cent female staffs have ever encountered sexual harassment behaviour on campus. Additionally, about 125 of the staff admitted that they have knowledge of other persons' experiences with sexual harassment behaviour and about 55 employees agree that sexual harassment incidents definitely occurred on their universities.

Consistent with many past studies on workplace sexual harassment, women are more likely to experience sexual harassment in the workplace compared to men. A study conducted by USM researchers in 2011 also revealed that female students had higher chances of experiencing sexual harassment behaviours on campus compared to the male students (Endut, et.al, 2011). Some scholars attribute the reasons behind this situation to the presence of unprofessional atmosphere and sexist attitudes on campus, lack of knowledge of grievance procedure and women's dressing style at the workplace thus encourage for sexual harassment behaviour (Ismail, et.al, 2007). Evidently, physically attractive women who are perceived to be sociable, dominant, warm and socially skilled were highly expected to experience such situations (Ismail, et.al, 2007). However, the latter conclusions are quite worrying because they put the blame on women for being sexually harassed. Women's choice of attire cannot be used to justify a sexually harassing behaviour. Sexual harassment is a form of gender-based violence and many countries in the world have made different forms of sexual harassment as criminal offences. Blaming the victim for soliciting an offensive behaviour is condoning and allowing the pervasiveness of such behaviour.

**Table 2: Sexual Harassment Experiences among Staffs on Campus**

			Experience of sexual harassment within campus			
			Yes	No	Unsure	Total
Gender	Female	Count	23	86	15	124
		% within Gender of Respondent	18.5%	69.4%	12.1%	100.0%

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<b>Male</b>	Count	7	73	5	85
	% within Gender of Respondent	8.2%	85.9%	5.9%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>	Count	30	159	20	209
	% within Gender of Respondent	14.4%	76.1%	9.6%	100.0%

### **3.4 Ways to Deal with Sexual Harassment at the Workplace**

In this study, the respondents were encouraged to share their opinions, experiences or suggestion on how to overcome the issue of sexual harassment at their universities. The findings showed that the majority of the staff, both female (60%) and male (56%), felt that awareness training is an important method to resolved the issue. Regular sexual harassment understanding courses are the good approaches and should be held regularly to all university's staffs or students so as to expose them directly to the issue. About 23% of female respondents felt that strong individual awareness and deep understanding of religious practices are crucial ways to hinder sexual harassment behavior. In the case of the male respondents, 35% felt that regular in-house awareness and motivation programmes for university staff and students would be the best method to deal with sexual harassment incidents. This means that both female and male staff maintained that individual and organizational initiatives are the main keys so to avoid such incidents amongst staff at the workplace.

### **4.0 Conclusion**

This study was conducted as part of an awareness programme to highlight the sexual harassment incidents, understanding and intervention at public universities in Malaysia. The study has shown that both *Universiti Sains Malaysia* and *Universiti Malaysia Sabah*'s staffs have reasonable understanding about sexual harassment issue. Similar to many previous studies, this study also concludes that female employees have had more encounters with sexual harassment in the workplace compared to men. However, the experiences of sexual harassment amongst men cannot, on the other hand, be ignored. Reports of sexual harassment on campus indicate that the safety of education institutions and its students are in threat. Knowledge about sexual harassment is important for employees to be able to understand what she/ he is experiencing and to give her/ him courage to seek intervention from the employer. To this end, regular awareness training for different categories of staff are crucial. Furthermore, clear institutional policies and grievance procedures on sexual harassment will greatly facilitate victims' access to justice in sexual harassment cases. An intervention at the national level to

the issue of sexual harassment is also needed so that law, policies and strategies to deal with it in different categories of workplace and spaces can be developed. To do so, further studies need to be conducted that look at the incidents, pervasiveness and experiences of sexual harassment.

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